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ABSTRACT

This document evaluates a series of weekly activity guides developed for families of at-risk preschool children. The purpose of the guides was to increase communication between teachers and families, the amount of time families spent with their children on developmentally appropriate learning activities, and parental understanding of developmentally appropriate curriculum and activities. Ten schools in five rural Kentucky school districts participated in the field study. Response rates were 43.3% on the first administration of the parent reaction form and 54.9% six weeks later on the second administration. Results indicate: (1) parents viewed the guides as interesting, helpful, easy to read, and informative; (2) the majority of parents read aloud sections of the guide to their children; (3) parents reported using the developmental learning activities in the guide once or twice a week; (4) the average amount of time families spent using the guides slightly increased over time; (5) parents' overall reactions included the opinion that the guide was interesting and fun for children; (6) the majority of parents expressed a desire to continue receiving the weekly guides; and (7) more than half the respondents indicated a willingness to speak with someone involved with the project about the guides. Thirteen teachers and their aides completed questionnaires monthly during the 3-month field testing of the guides. Results indicate that the program increased communication between parents and teachers and promoted parental involvement. This document includes results of pilot testing of prototype issues and evaluation of Family Connections workshops. It also includes 13 numerous data tables and 6 figures. (LP)

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Field Test Evaluation of *Family Connections*, Volume I

by:

Robert D. Childers
and
Patricia Penn

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November 24, 1992

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- professional quality,
- curriculum and instruction,
- community support, and
- opportunity for access to quality education by all children.

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SECTION I: ABSTRACT

Families of at-risk children do spend time with their children in activities that enhance early learning when those families are given interesting, readable, easy-to-use materials. Family Connections, a set of 30 colorful, developmentally appropriately family guides, is a product of the Appalachia Educational Laboratory's Rural Excel Program. In a multi-site field test of the research-based materials during spring semester 1992, project staff found that Family Connections guides are a potentially powerful tool in developing a strong parent involvement program. Parental reaction to the guides was uniformly positive. Schools with programs for four-year-old children also increased the amount of communication between school and home when they used Family Connections. The Rural Excel Program involved key educational leaders in all stages of product development, which increased the likelihood of product use. By early fall 1992, programs in seven states had purchased Family Connections for use in more than 22,000 homes.

SECTION II: INTRODUCTION

The Rural Excel Program's goal is to provide rural educators with tested materials and practices that show promise of improving student performance in classrooms. The program's work is guided by educators in two ways. First, a group of AEL board members serves as the Rural Excel Program Advisory Committee. Second, instructional leaders from each of the Laboratory's four state departments of education, appointed by the chief state school officer, act as a coordinating committee to ensure that program work complements state school improvement initiatives already underway.

Factors Influencing Decision

A number of factors influenced the Rural Excel Program's decision to focus on preschool education as one of its first programmatic efforts.

National Goals. The first of six national education goals set forth by the National Governors' Association in 1990 stated that by the year 2000 all children in America will start school ready to learn. Its objectives affirm the importance of access to developmentally appropriate preschool programs, of parent involvement in their children's early learning, and of the importance of nutrition and health care for children.

Early Childhood Activities in the AEL Region. Passage of the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 (KERA) played a key role in the decision. The Act's mandate of preschool education for at-risk four-year-old children was influential in Rural Excel's deciding to develop materials that would enhance preschool education. Other states in AEL's region were also concerned with early childhood.

A state level task force in Tennessee developed policy for early childhood education and parent involvement to respond to a resolution adopted by the General Assembly in 1990. The policy's purposes were to provide positive learning outcomes for young children; promote parental involvement, enabling families to help themselves; and, promote coordination of services for families and children.

In a special initiative, Virginia launched early childhood demonstration projects at 15 school sites to study the practical application of early childhood educational research and reform practices along with implementation processes. One option that schools could choose to implement was a program for four-year-olds.

The West Virginia Blue Ribbon Commission was charged with recommending to the state board of education initiatives for the future of West Virginia's children. Among its recommendations was one that the state provide high-quality, comprehensive preschool programs for all three- and four-year-old children.

AEL's Experience in Early Childhood Education. AEL's pioneering work in home-based preschool education two decades earlier had influenced not only the federal Home Start program but also such major children's television programming as "Captain Kangaroo." The HOPE (Home-Oriented Preschool Education) materials AEL developed constituted a rich resource to potential early childhood projects. HOPE materials were research-based and thoroughly field-tested.

Background Data

During the first half of 1991, two themes recurred during AEL staff discussions with early childhood specialists throughout the Region: (1) how to provide developmentally appropriate programs for preschool and kindergarten children, yet not push them into learning situations inappropriate for their age;

and (2) how to encourage meaningful and effective involvement of all parents, especially those whose children are defined as at-risk.

In response to those expressed concerns, Rural Excel convened a two-day early childhood conference in July 1991 to explore various possibilities. Eleven early childhood professionals from departments of education in the four states that AEL serves participated in the meeting.

The consensus was that Rural Excel should conduct a research and development project in the field of early childhood education; that the project should focus on materials and activities to involve parents as both teachers and learners; and, that in reaching parents the program should use a variety of strategies and media.

Project Plan

Following the July conference, Rural Excel staff prepared a plan that included developing and testing the following: (1) a series of guides, named Family Connections, to be sent into children's homes on a weekly basis; and (2) a variety of instructional materials for teachers, including a Family Connections user handbook and videotapes for use with parent groups.

Staff designed the plan to meet three objectives:

1. To increase the number of communications between teachers and families of young children.
2. To increase the amount of time families spend with their young children on developmentally appropriate learning activities.
3. To increase parental understanding of developmentally appropriate curriculum and activities in programs for young children.

Rationale for Emphasis on Parent Involvement

A vast and rapidly growing body of research on parent involvement in education served as a stimulus for an emphasis on materials that could help parents help their young children learn. Research that validates the importance of family involvement in successful school experiences has been underway since Rankin (1967) identified parental behaviors that significantly influence children's achievement. Rich (1976) found that parents who used simple "recipes" to work with their children at home were able to increase their children's reading achievement.

When Joyce Epstein testified before the House of Representatives Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families (1984), she said that if teachers chose only one parent involvement policy to stress, research would suggest the biggest payoff from helping parents involve their children in learning activities at home. Epstein (1987) also found "consistent evidence that parents' encouragement, activities, interest at home and their participation at school affect their children's achievement, even after student ability and family SES are taken into account."

Family Connections project staff were particularly concerned with a longitudinal study of Project HOPE by Gotts (1980). Children aged three to five whose parents were trained to augment daily television broadcasts showed consistently higher achievement through two follow-up studies over the first seven years of their schooling than did children who got only the television programs. HOPE materials would be a significant part of Family Connections guides.

When Anne Henderson annotated a bibliography of parent involvement literature for the National Committee for Citizens in Education (1987) she wrote, "Now the

evidence is beyond dispute: parent involvement improves student achievement. When parents are involved, children do better in school, and they go to better schools."

Purposes and Audiences of Evaluation Report

The purpose of the evaluation is twofold: (1) to document reactions of parents, children, teachers, and other early childhood education specialists to Family Connections weekly guides; and, (2) to determine whether the weekly guides component of the plan contributes to accomplishment of the project's overall goals.

The evaluation report has two primary audiences: (1) project staff, AEL administration, and the program monitor from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI); and, (2) state departments of education personnel, local education leaders, Head Start program directors, child care providers, and others responsible for providing educational services to young children or for administering parent involvement programs. Early childhood specialists in higher education, parents and parent groups, and researchers in preschool education and parent involvement (and perhaps other areas) make up a secondary audience.

SECTION III: EVALUATION PROCEDURES

Prototype Design Phase

One of the first design decisions made about the guides was to produce sufficient issues for a full school year, allowing time for startup and completion weeks without guides. Staff decided to produce 30 issues. The title Family Connections was deemed more inclusive than a title that used the word "parent," thereby encouraging not only traditional parents but also siblings and alternative caregivers to be part of young children's early learning.

Other critical early decisions are listed below.

Content:

- to make the guides neither seasonal nor thematic, so that school/family use of the materials could begin at any time during the year;
- to include a message for parents or other caregivers in each issue to enhance their knowledge about, and understanding of, important developmental and other issues of childhood;
- to include age appropriate and developmentally appropriate activities in each issue, encouraging parents to use materials commonly found in homes in ways that build on children's life experiences and structured to be simple and not time-consuming;
- to include at least one read-aloud selection in every issue, thereby guaranteeing that homes without books and other reading materials would have something at hand to be read to young children;
- to include regularly a feature, called the Sunshine Gram, to structure and encourage at least one positive communication a month from school to home;

- to write everything in the guides at a reading level of fifth grade or lower to assure that virtually everyone could read them with understanding; (Note: The editor checked reading levels of the messages to parents and the total content of each issue for Flesch Reading Ease, Gunning's Fog Index, and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level with a computer program, Grammatik 5.)

Format

- to limit the size of the guide to four pages, so that users would see it as a comfortable length to work with;
- to use 10-point sized type with adequate leading to increase reading ease;
- to use colored paper and original illustrations to arouse the interest of both children and adults;
- to provide space for a name ("For the family of:") so that guides could be personalized;
- to include in the handbook various headers that programs/teachers could use to produce inserts for the guides.

Pilot Test of Prototype Issues

Based on the foregoing decisions, staff produced two prototype issues of Family Connections. The prototype issues were presented to (1) participants in a parent involvement workshop for preschool practitioners; and, (2) a select group of experts in early childhood education for their review and reactions.

Potential Users' Evaluation. Rural Excel invited teachers, aides and preschool coordinators from five school districts in eastern Kentucky's programs

for at-risk four-year-olds to attend the one-day session. The site was Morehead, Kentucky, selected for its reasonable proximity to AEL and potential field-test sites.

Project staff designed the workshop to enhance teacher understanding of the importance of family involvement; to help them plan home visits to achieve maximum effectiveness; to get reaction to the prototype guides; and, to identify potential field-test sites. Trainers used experiential learning activities and included the interview design process to elicit participant input on family guide content. That input reinforced earlier staff decisions about content, and informed subsequent decisions about content and format.

Participants received a review sheet on which to record their quantifiable reactions to the guides. The sheet included an interval scale to measure responses from highest to lowest on seven variables: developmental appropriateness; interest to parents; informativeness to parents; reinforcement to schools; appropriateness of illustrations; understandability by parents; and, usability by parents. Participants rated every item positively, as shown by the data displayed in Table 1. Workshop participants' mean ratings ranged from 4.44 to 4.81 on a scale of one to five with five being most favorable.

TABLE 1

Workshop Participants' Ratings* of Prototype Guides
On A Number of Variables

Variable	N	Mean	SD
Developmentally appropriate for 4-year-olds?	25	4.84	0.37
Interesting to parents?	26	4.69	0.55
Informative to parents?	26	4.81	0.40
Reinforcing of school?	26	4.81	0.40
Appropriately illustrated?	26	4.58	0.81
Understandable by most parents?	25	4.52	0.71
Usable by most parents?	25	4.44	0.71

*Ratings based on 1 being the least favorable and 5 the most favorable.

Experts' Evaluation. Project staff sought reactions from early childhood experts in two settings. The first was a 1991 regional conference on preschool-to-school linkages. Among those who reviewed and responded to the Family Connections prototypes were a director of early childhood education in a large metropolitan district; a Head Start director in a populous midwestern city; and a nationally known early childhood policy and practice consultant. Their enthusiastic reactions included comments on the need for such materials to help parents enhance their young children's early learning; on the ease with which families could use the guides; and on their attractiveness and practicality.

One said "I like the name Family Connections. It's not telling families what to do, or placing a burden on the family. It's rather a link between families and

schools--a connection that needs to be made. Parents will like something that goes into the home on a regular basis, and will look forward to it."

The second setting was a meeting of an ad hoc advisory group that included a state Title I director; a representative of a governor's cabinet on children and families; a private education fund director; and a state early childhood specialist. Their reactions virtually echoed those of the group described above.

Outcomes of prototype pilot testing. In light of responses from early childhood experts and of the teachers' expressed need for the guides as soon as possible, project staff decided to make production and field-testing of Family Connections their first priority. Staff also decided to:

- involve a number of field-test sites;
- conduct field-test planning sessions in a central location; and,
- incorporate planning sessions into workshops for teachers and aides.

Field Test of Family Connections Guides

Teachers, aides, and preschool coordinators in the field test sites contracted to do the following:

(1) Attend a series of one-day work sessions with project staff during the 1992 spring semester at a central location. School systems paid travel costs of their participating staff.

(2) Distribute Family Connections weekly to all families of children enrolled in their program and write Sunshine Grams as prescribed.

(3) Assist project staff in evaluating the weekly guides by completing forms, maintaining records, collecting information from parents, and submitting all data to AEL.

Project staff agreed to provide sites with sufficient copies of the weekly guides for all children enrolled in their programs; provide technical assistance in conducting the field test and related tasks; and provide necessary forms for data collection. AEL paid for the meeting facilities and lunch and break costs for work session participants.

Field Test Sites Profile

Ten schools in five districts participated in the field test of **Family Connections**. Thirteen teachers had 19 classes, three of which were full-day programs, the other 16 were half-day. All but three programs met Mondays through Thursdays, to leave Fridays open for home visits and other extra-curricular activities. Project staff therefore scheduled subsequent workshops on Fridays.

The teacher experience range was one year to 38 years, an average of 2.6 years experience when the 38-year veteran is excluded. Five teachers had master's degrees, five had bachelor's degrees, and three held child development associate certificates. Most of the teachers were certified for early elementary (K-4), and most had requested placement in the new Kentucky program for four-year-olds. The child development associates taught in Head Start programs; one had herself been a Head Start mother.

Of a total of 284 children enrolled in the field-test programs, 63 were not defined as at-risk. (Kentucky defines "at-risk" as any child eligible for free school lunches.) Four children were diagnosed as learning disabled; seven, physically handicapped; and 45 had speech impairments that qualified them for speech therapy.

The majority of children were four years old. A few were still three when the field test began; several experienced their fifth birthday early in the field test.

The project did not collect data on family composition or ethnicity. During site visits to two locations, project staff observed that children of African-American descent were part of the sample, which also included at least one Asian-American family. Family composition included two-parent families; single-parent families, including some with fathers as custodial parents; only-child families; blended families; and extended families. Educational levels of parents are known to project staff in only isolated instances; teachers reported finding very few parents who were totally unable to read, however.

Data Collection Instruments

Project staff developed a "Parent Reaction Form" on which to obtain parent responses to the weekly guides. The Family Connections nameplate headed the form, which included a printed note to parents asking them for their opinions about the guides. The child's teacher signed the note. Questions dealt with such topics as the messages to parents, read-aloud selections, activities, and amount of time spent with children on the guides. The form sought overall reactions to the guides and comments, asked whether respondents wished to continue to receive them, and asked if they would be willing to speak with someone from AEL. Teachers inserted forms in the fourth and, with minor changes in the note to parents, with the tenth issue of Family Connections.

Teachers also reported monthly the numbers and types of communications between school and family on the "Teacher/Family Communications Questionnaire." Section I was concerned with school-initiated communications and Section II with family-initiated communications. Each section contained five questions, covering written communications, telephone calls, parent conferences, and visits.

Project staff used AEL's standard workshop evaluation form to get participant ratings on the field-test work sessions, which were in fact workshops. The form collects ratings on a series of service quality scales.

Reliability data are not available on the "Parent Reaction Form" or the "Teacher/Family Communication Questionnaire." The use of these instruments in developing and field testing a new product can be justified. Reliability (Chronbach Alpha) on the four administrations of service quality scales was .88, .91, .89, and .77.

SECTION IV: FIELD TEST EVALUATION FINDINGS

Parent Reactions to Guides

Parents completed and returned a total of 123 "Parent Reaction Forms" when teachers inserted them in Issue 4 of Family Connections. Six weeks later, when teachers inserted the forms in Issue 10, 156 forms were completed and returned. The response rates were 43.3 percent on the first administration and 54.9 percent on the second. These response rates were judged to be very good, considering that most respondents are parents of at-risk children. The fact that the response rate increased for the second administration is noteworthy.

Reactions to the messages to parents that appear on page 1 of each issue are presented in Table 2. Respondents were asked to check all that apply on a list of seven options. At the first administration, the majority of respondents indicated that the messages were "interesting" (83.7%), "helpful" (71.5%), "easy to read" (57.7%), and "informative" (54.5%). Less then three percent found them "too simple" (2.4%), and less than one percent checked "hard to read" or "not practical."

Data from the second administration were more positive than the first. Respondents viewed the messages as "interesting" (98.1%), "helpful" (71.2%), "easy to read" (66.0%) and "informative" (60.9%). Two of the 156 respondents checked "hard to read" and only one checked "too simple" and "not practical."

TABLE 2

Parents' Reactions To The Messages To Parents In Family Connections By Time Intervals*

Response Options	Initial Reaction (n = 123) No.	%	Later Reaction (n = 156) No.	%
Interesting	103	83.7	153	98.1
Hard to Read	1	0.8	2	1.3
Easy to Read	71	57.7	103	66.0
Helpful	88	71.5	111	71.2
Too Simple	3	2.4	1	.6
Not Practical	0	.0	1	.6
Informative	67	54.5	95	60.9

*Survey Question: A message to parents is on the front page of each issue. Would you say the messages are (check all that apply):

Parents were asked whether they read the read-aloud selections to their child from "every issue," "most issues," "a few issues," or "did not read aloud." Their responses from both administrations are displayed in Table 3.

TABLE 3

Parents' Reactions To The Read Aloud Selections In Family Connections By Time Intervals*

Response Options	Initial Reaction (n = 123) No.	%	Later Reaction (n = 156) No.	%
Every Issue	92	74.8	84	53.8
Most Issues	18	14.6	49	31.4
A Few Issues	9	7.3	14	9.0
Did Not Read Aloud	2	1.6	1	.6
No Response	2	1.6	8	5.1
TOTAL	123	99.9**	156	99.9**

*Survey Question: Family Connections has something in each issue for you to read aloud to your child. Did you read something to your child from:

**Total does not equal 100 due to rounding.

A vast majority during the first administration (89.4%) and during the second administration (85.2%) indicated that they read the selections aloud in "most issues" if not in "every issue." More respondents checked "every issue" in the first administration (74.8%) than in the second (53,8%).

How often parents reported using the activities in Family Connections is presented in Table 4. An examination of the data in Table 4 reveals that less than one percent of those responding indicated that they did not do any activity from Family Connections. The most common response was "one or two times a week" in both the first (35.8%) and the second (43.6%) administrations.

TABLE 4

Amount of Use of The Activities in Family Connections
By Time Intervals*

Response Options	Initial Reaction (n = 123) No.	%	Later Reaction (n = 156) No.	%
We did an activity from Family Connections almost every day.	20	16.3	18	11.5
We did an activity three or four times a week.	31	25.2	36	23.1
We did an activity one or two times a week.	44	35.8	68	43.6
We did an activity occasionally.	26	21.1	27	17.3
We did not do any activity from Family Connections.	1	.8	0	.0
No Response	1	.8	7	4.5
TOTAL	123	100.0	156	100.0

*Survey Question: Family Connections also has directions for activities you can do with your child. Please check ( ) the statement below that best describes how you and your child used the guides.

Approximately one-fourth (25.2% and 23.1%) of both groups reported doing activities "three or four times a week"; 16.3 percent in the first administration and 11.5 percent in the second indicated they did an activity "almost every day."

The amount of time families spent with Family Connections in an average week is reported in Table 5.

TABLE 5

Amount Of Time Parents Spend With Family Connections In An Average Week By Time Intervals*

Response Options	Initial Reaction (n = 123) No.	%	Later Reaction (n = 156) No.	%
Less Than 5 Minutes	3	2.4	2	1.3
5 to 14 Minutes	23	18.7	22	14.1
15 to 29 Minutes	46	37.4	54	34.6
30 to 59 Minutes	26	21.1	41	26.3
1 to 2 Hours	14	11.4	22	14.1
More Than 2 Hours	7	5.7	8	5.1
No Response	4	3.3	7	4.5
TOTAL	123	100.0	156	100.0

*Survey Question: How much time would you estimate you spend with Family Connections in an average week?

An examination of Table 5 reveals that the average amount of time a family spent did not go down after receiving six additional issues, but rather went up slightly. For example, the percentage who spent one hour or more per issue went from 17.1 percent to 19.2 percent. The percentage who spent 30-59 minutes increased from 21.1 to 26.3.

Table 6 displays parents' overall reactions to Family Connections by time intervals. Respondents were instructed to check "all that describe how you feel about Family Connections" from a list of 11 response options. They most often selected the same two in both administrations: "interesting" (80.5% and 85.9%) and "fun for child" (85.2% and 88.5%). Approximately one- half to two-thirds of

respondents in both administrations checked "useful" (67.5% and 62.2%), "easy to do" (55.3% and 58.3%), and "like poems" (48.8% and 57.7%). About one-third (30.9% and 33.3%) in both groups checked "would like more activities" and "like the pictures." Less than four percent (between 0.0% and 3.2%) checked negative-type responses: "boring," "don't have supplies," "too hard to do," or "don't have time to do."

TABLE 6
Parents' Overall Reactions To Family Connections
By Time Intervals*

Response Options	Initial Reaction (n = 123)		Later Reaction (n = 156)	
	No.	%	No.	%
Interesting	99	80.5	134	85.9
Fun For Child	104	85.2	138	88.5
Boring	1	.8	0	.0
Don't Have Supplies	3	2.4	5	3.2
Would Like More Activities	40	32.5	52	33.3
Like the Pictures	38	30.9	49	31.4
Too Hard To Do	1	.8	0	.0
Easy To Do	68	55.3	91	58.3
Don't Have Time To Do	1	.8	5	3.2
Like Poems	60	48.8	90	57.7
Useful	83	67.5	97	62.2

*Survey Question: Please check all of the following that describe how you feel about Family Connections.

Reactions to the question, "Would you like to keep getting Family Connections?" are summarized in Table 7.

TABLE 7

Parents' Desire to Continue to Receive Family Connections By Time Intervals*

Response Options	Initial Reaction (n = 123) No.	%	Later Reaction (n = 156) No.	%
Yes	109	88.6	138	88.5
No	1	.8	0	.0
Don't Care	6	4.9	9	5.8
No Response	7	5.7	9	5.8
TOTAL	123	100.0	156	100.1**

*Survey Question: Would you like to keep getting Family Connections?

**Total does not equal 100 due to rounding.

Response options were "yes," "no," and "don't care." Approximately six percent failed to respond. Of those who did respond, 93.9 percent of the total group said they would like to continue to receive Family Connections. The percentage that checked "don't care" was 4.9 percent in the first administration and 5.8 percent in the second. One respondent in a total of 279 checked the "no" response option.

Table 8 summarizes the number and percentage of respondents who indicated a willingness to speak with someone at AEL about Family Connections. More than half (57.7% in the first administration and 60.35% in the second) indicated they were willing to have someone from AEL speak with them. About one-fourth (21.1% and 26.95%) said they were not willing.

TABLE 8

Parents' Willingness To Speak With Someone At AEL About The Guides By Time Intervals*

Response Options	Initial Reaction (n = 123) No.	%	Later Reaction (n = 156) No.	%
Yes	71	57.7	94	60.3
No	26	21.1	42	26.9
No Response	26	21.1	20	12.8
TOTAL	123	99.9**	156	100.0

*Survey Question: Would you be willing to speak with someone from the Appalachia Educational Laboratory if they have additional questions about the guides?

**Total does not equal 100 due to rounding.

Parent Comments About Family Guides. The "Parent Reaction Form" included a space for open-ended comments. Respondents wrote 121 comments of various kinds on the reaction forms. In analyzing the compilation of the comments, certain words appeared to occur most often: "enjoy," "learn," and "helpful." Two phrases also recurred: "quality time" and "other family members." Project staff in interactive work sessions identified five mutually exclusive categories, which they agreed were creditable, into which to sort the comments: (1) Children enjoy/learn from; (2) Parents enjoy/find helpful; (3) Other family members enjoy/get involved; (4) Family Connections promotes quality time; and, (5) Miscellaneous.

Table 9 displays the number and percentage of comments that fall into each of the five categories. Where both parent and child appeared in a comment about

enjoyment, that comment was arbitrarily categorized by which was named first. Approximately two-thirds (62.8%) of the comments fell into the first two categories.

TABLE 9

Number and Percentage of Respondents' Comments by Categories

Category	Number	Percent
1. Children enjoy/learn from	37	30.58
2. Parents learn/find helpful	39	32.23
3. Other family members enjoy/get involved	16	13.22
4. Family Connections promotes quality/time	10	8.26
5. Miscellaneous	19	15.70
TOTAL	121	*99.99

*Total does not equal 100 due to rounding.

Representative quotations from each category follow.

1. Children enjoy/learn from--"Timmy enjoys Family Connections and he has learned a lot from it." "My son really enjoys doing the activities. His interest is genuine." "Alisha really enjoys Family Connections. She wants me to read each issue front to back more than once." "Family Connections is very good for my daughter. She enjoys going over and over the activities." "Felicia enjoys the poems and remembers them."
2. Parents enjoy/find helpful--"I have more than one child so the message for parents on the front page is really helpful to me. My children love the activities." "I like knowing what my child should be able to do at this age level." "I thought the issues were very informative and creative, and had

good learning and memory ideas." "They are helpful in showing me ways to teach Chris things." "I keep these newsletters handy so we can always have something interesting to do. Tyler enjoys the activities."

3. Other family members enjoy/get involved--"Our children enjoy receiving these issues. Our oldest will help our youngest learn the poems and will help with the activities." "I hope we keep getting these. Heather has got a sister who is 3 years old and she also enjoys doing the activities with Heather." "My daughter and my 2 1/2-year-old son and my five-year-old nephew really do enjoy doing activities from Family Connections. They love. . .everything. So do I." "Not only does it give me ideas to do with my child, but it gives my 12-year-old son easy activities to do with him." "All three of my children are learning from Family Connections. Thank you."
4. Family Connections promotes quality time--"I don't get much time with [my daughter]. The poems and songs we can do at night. We enjoy this time together." "My daughter and I enjoy sitting down and looking at Family Connections together. If people take advantage of this, it is a great way for the whole family to enjoy quality time." "It gives my child and me special time together and she remembers it for a long time." "It gives me and Alisha time to spend together. I like that."
5. Miscellaneous--"Being a working mother I don't always have enough time to do all the activities, but I'm saving the papers to do the activities in the future." "Need more activities." "The time span is sometimes difficult to get everything done in. I am keeping the copies so activities we didn't do or ones we really enjoyed can be repeated later." "Could be a little longer." "They're great." "Would like to have something more toward my daughter's situation. She is a special needs child."

Teacher/Family Communications Questionnaire

The 13 teachers and their aides jointly completed the "Teacher/Family Communications Questionnaire" each month during the field test. The number of written communications teachers sent home during the three months is presented in Figure 1.

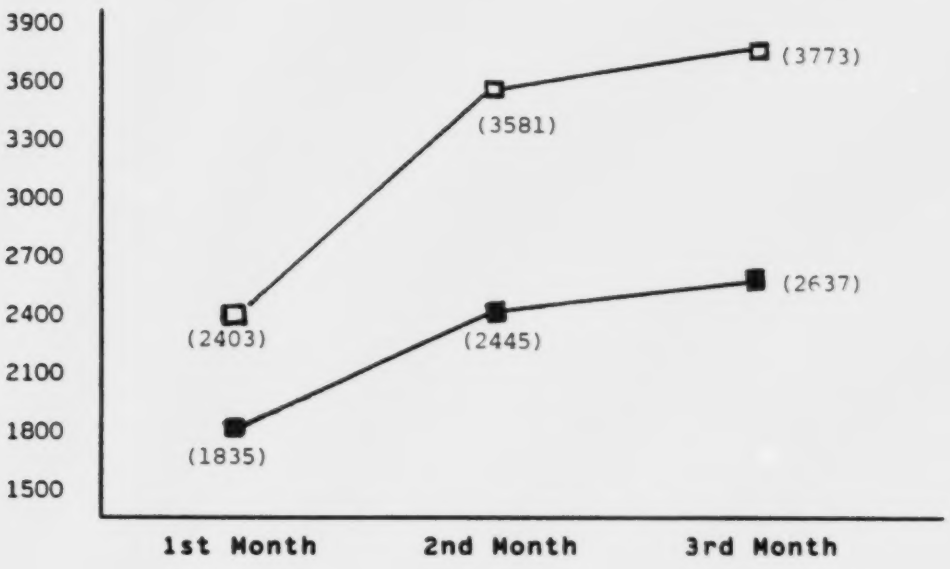

FIGURE 1

Number of Written Communications Teachers Sent Home by Time Intervals

The upper line on the graph represents all written communications, including Family Connections; the lower line does not include Family Connections. Both lines show increases in numbers with each succeeding month.

Figure 2 graphs by time intervals the number of parents who sent a written note to school. Teachers reported that they received 109 notes from parents during the first month. The number of notes from parents declined slightly during the second month (N=98), but jumped dramatically during the third month (N=210).

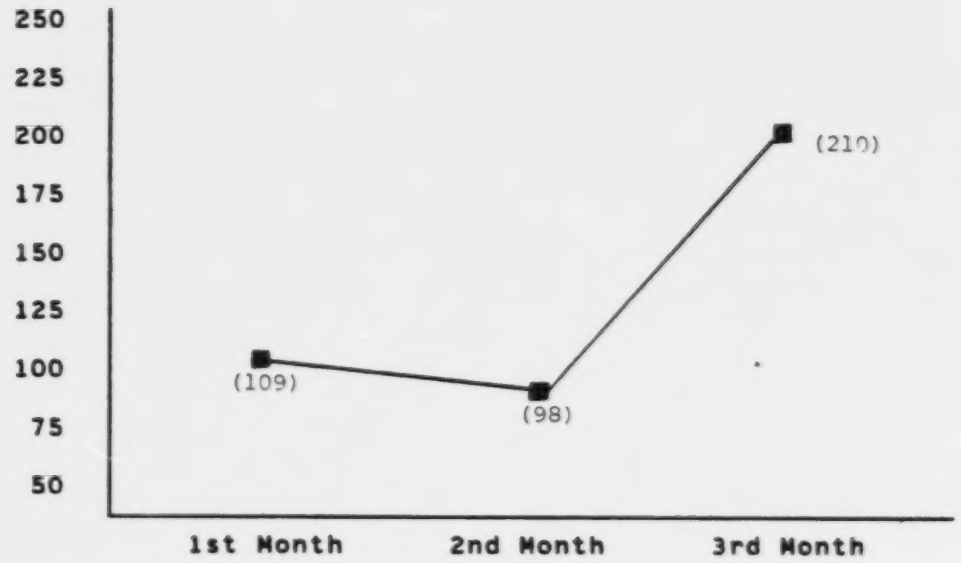

FIGURE 2

Number of Parents Who Sent a Written Note to School by Time Intervals

The number of telephone calls initiated by schools and the number initiated by families are plotted by time intervals in Figure 3.

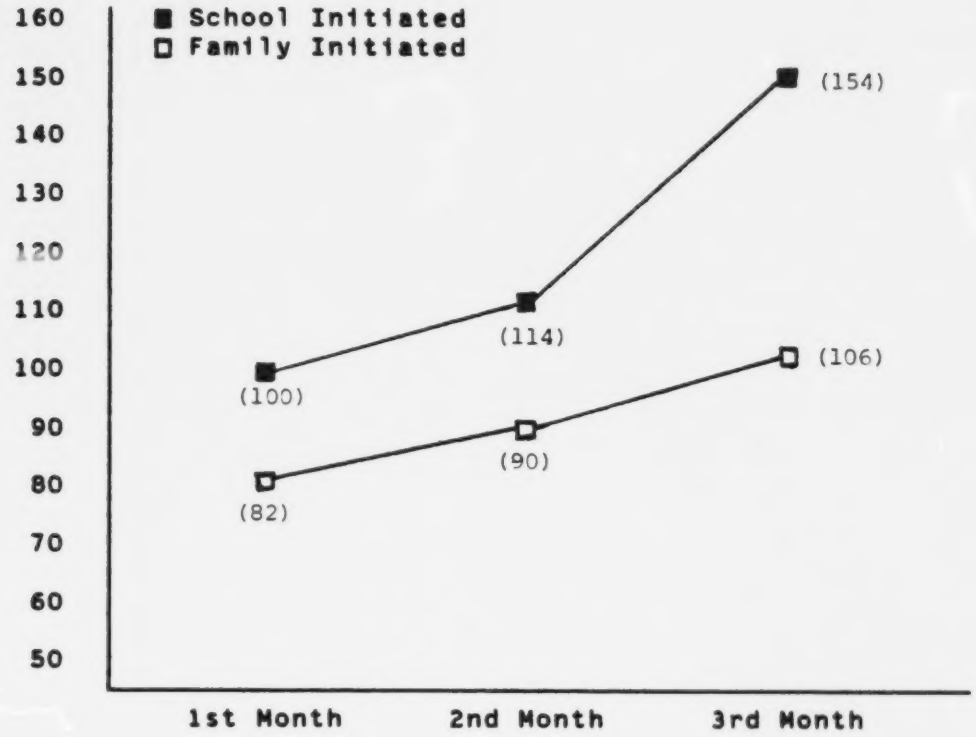

FIGURE 3

Number of Phone calls Initiated by School and Family by Time Intervals

The figure shows that schools, as would be expected, initiated a larger number of phone calls than did parents in each month. The numbers for both schools and parents increased each month, but at a noticeably higher rate for schools in the third month.

Figure 4 plots the number of parent-teacher conferences conducted during monthly intervals in the field test of Family Connections. The number of conferences during the first month (N=30) dropped slightly during the second month (N=23), but increased dramatically in the third month (N=87).

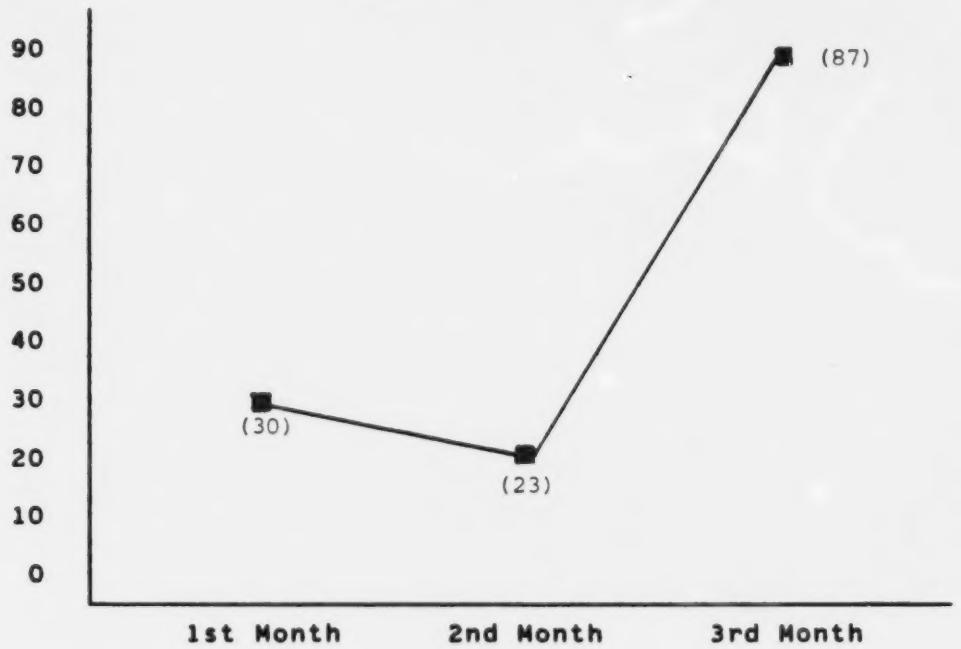

FIGURE 4

Number of Parent/Teacher Conferences Conducted by Time Intervals

The number of parents who came to visit, observe, or help in the classroom is plotted by time intervals in Figure 5. The number of visits in the first month (N=80) increased more than 25 percent in the second month (N=105), and more than doubled again in the third month (N=228).

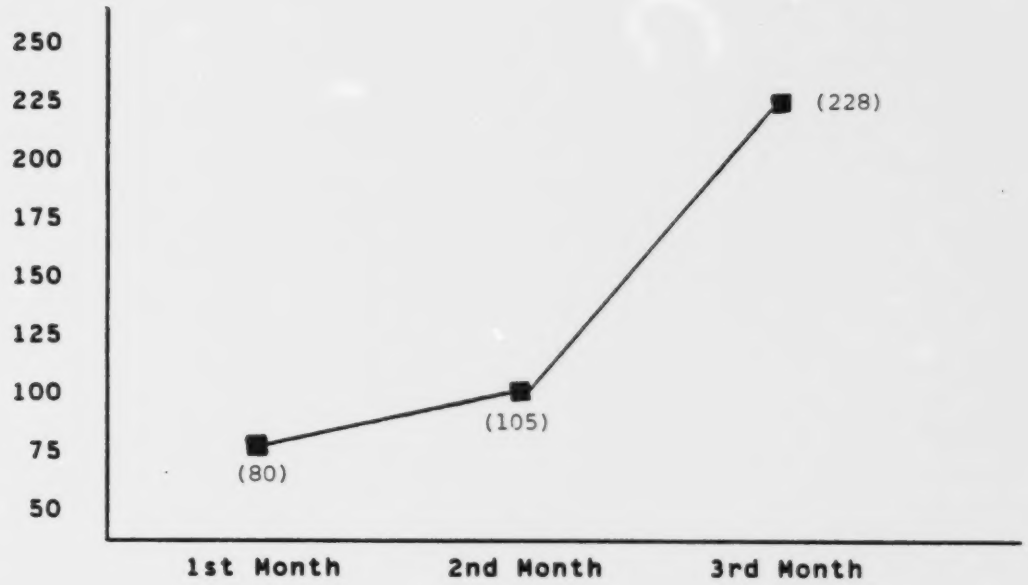

FIGURE 5

Number of Parents Who Came to Visit, Observe, or Help in the Classroom by Time Intervals

Figure 6 is a graph of the number of home visits teachers made during the three monthly intervals.

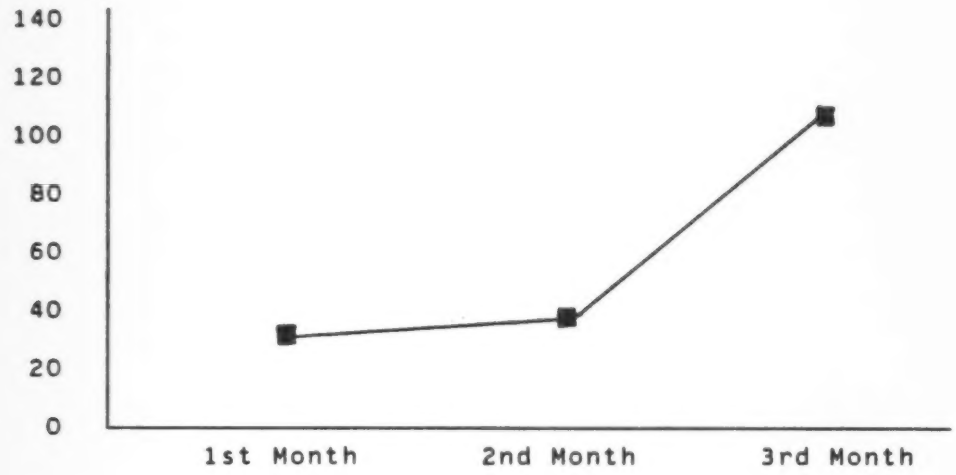

FIGURE 6

Number of Home Visits Made by Teachers by Time Intervals

Teachers conducted 34 home visits during the first month of the field test, 38 during the second month, and 106 during the third month.

Workshop Evaluations

Tables 10 through 13 present, on a series of services quality scales, participant ratings of four Family Connections project workshops. The eight services quality questions load on seven factors discussed below. Each question included a response scale of 0-50 points. The anchor point descriptors for each scale varied according to the content of the question. The number of respondents ranged from 16 in the third workshop to 26 in the first. It should be noted that the first workshop was for the purpose of pilot testing prototype issues of Family Connections; it preceded selection of the field test sites.

Timeliness. This factor is measured by question number 1. The mean ratings on timeliness ranged from a low of 42.94 on the fourth workshop to a high of 46.05.

Responsiveness. Questions two and seven together provide data for assessing the responsiveness factor. Mean ratings for question 2 ranged from 46.88 to 49.41 and 42.35 to 46.25 on Question 7.

Competence. This factor is assessed by question 3. The four mean ratings on this question ranged from 45.0 to 47.65.

Location. Assessment of this factor is based upon question 4, which is concerned with how convenient participants perceived the workshop location to be in relation to their usual work location. Almost without fail, AEL's workshops receive their lowest ratings on this variable, and this was true of the Family Connections project workshops. Mean ratings ranged from a low of 25.29 on the fourth workshop to a high of 40.77. (It is worth noting that the fourth workshop was at a different location from the other three because of a scheduling conflict. The changed location had parking distant from the training room, along with other disadvantages.)

Communication. Data from question 5 are used to assess the communication factor. Ratings on this factor ranged from 44.38 on the third workshop to 48.24 on the fourth.

Credibility. AEL's credibility as an R&D service provider is assessed with data from question 6. Mean ratings on this question ranged from 45.00 to 46.05 on the four workshops.

Materials. Question 8 asks participants to rate the usefulness of the materials provided in workshops. The means ratings participants gave Family Connections workshops ranged from 45.88 to 47.00.

An examination of Tables 10-13 reveals that participants gave Family Connections workshops very high ratings. On a scale of 0-50, 23 of the aggregate 32 ratings (8 questions x 4 workshops) were 45.0 or higher, and another six were between 40.0 and 44.9. Only three mean ratings were below 40.0, and all three related to convenience of location.

TABLE 10

Participants' Ratings of Family Connections First Workshop on a Series of Service Quality Scales*

Service Quality Scale Questions	N	X	SD
1. Did AEL carry out planned activities at the times scheduled?	26	44.62	6.3
2. How responsive were AEL staff and/or consultants to your requests for service and/or assistance during this event?	26	46.92	5.4
3. In this event, how skilled were AEL staff and/or consultants in completing their tasks?	26	46.92	5.4
4. How convenient was this AEL event to your location?	26	40.77	10.0
5. During this event, how clear were AEL staff and/or consultant explanations?	26	46.54	5.5
6. Did this event enhance AEL's credibility as an R & D service provider?	26	45.65	5.8
7. How well did AEL staff and/or consultants understand your professional needs during this event?	26	44.23	7.4
8. How useful were the materials provided to you during this AEL event?	26	46.00	5.7

*Note: Each Service Quality Question included a response scale of 0-50 points. The anchor points for each response scale varied according to the content of the question. For example, the anchor for question #1 was "never" and "always," with "somewhat" as the midpoint.

TABLE 11

Participants' Ratings of Family Connections Second Workshop on a Series of Service Quality Scales*

Service Quality Scale Questions	N	X	SD
1. Did AEL carry out planned activities at the times scheduled?	19	46.05	5.0
2. How responsive were AEL staff and/or consultants to your requests for service and/or assistance during this event?	20	48.00	4.1
3. In this event, how skilled were AEL staff and/or consultants in completing their tasks?	20	46.75	4.7
4. How convenient was this AEL event to your location?	20	30.50	11.6
5. During this event, how clear were AEL staff and/or consultant explanations?	20	47.00	4.4
6. Did this event enhance AEL's credibility as an R & D service provider?	19	46.05	4.9
7. How well did AEL staff and/or consultants understand your professional needs during this event?	20	46.00	5.8
8. How useful were the materials provided to you during this AEL event?	20	47.00	4.1

*Note: Each Service Quality Question included a response scale of 0-50 points. The anchor points for each response scale varied according to the content of the question. For example, the anchor for question #1 was "never" and "always," with "somewhat" as the midpoint.

TABLE 12

Participants' Ratings of Family Connections Third Workshop on a Series of Service Quality Scales*

Service Quality Scale Questions	N	X	SD
1. Did AEL carry out planned activities at the times scheduled?	16	45.00	6.3
2. How responsive were AEL staff and/or consultants to your requests for service and/or assistance during this event?	16	46.88	4.8
3. In this event, how skilled were AEL staff and/or consultants in completing their tasks?	16	45.00	5.2
4. How convenient was this AEL event to your location?	16	31.25	12.0
5. During this event, how clear were AEL staff and/or consultant explanations?	16	44.38	5.1
6. Did this event enhance AEL's credibility as an R & D service provider?	16	45.00	6.3
7. How well did AEL staff and/or consultants understand your professional needs during this event?	16	46.25	5.0
8. How useful were the materials provided to you during this AEL event?	16	46.25	5.0

*Note: Each Service Quality Question included a response scale of 0-50 points. The anchor points for each response scale varied according to the content of the question. For example, the anchor for question #1 was "never" and "always," with "somewhat" as the midpoint.

TABLE 13

Participants' Ratings of Family Connections Fourth Workshop on a Series of Service Quality Scales*

Service Quality Scale Questions	N	X	SD
1. Did AEL carry out planned activities at the times scheduled?	17	42.94	8.5
2. How responsive were AEL staff and/or consultants to your requests for service and/or assistance during this event?	17	49.41	2.4
3. In this event, how skilled were AEL staff and/or consultants in completing their tasks?	17	47.65	5.6
4. How convenient was this AEL event to your location?	17	25.29	15.5
5. During this event, how clear were AEL staff and/or consultant explanations?	17	48.24	3.9
6. Did this event enhance AEL's credibility as an R & D service provider?	17	45.88	6.2
7. How well did AEL staff and/or consultants understand your professional needs during this event?	17	42.35	13.0
8. How useful were the materials provided to you during this AEL event?	17	45.88	5.1

*Note: Each Service Quality Question included a response scale of 0-50 points. The anchor points for each response scale varied according to the content of the question. For example, the anchor for question #1 was "never" and "always," with "somewhat" as the midpoint.

SECTION V: DISCUSSION

Parent Reactions to Guides

Parents reacted to Family Connections in an overwhelmingly positive manner, and their reactions support research findings that informed the work of Family Connections from the outset. Project staff remain convinced that certain premises are sound: the majority of parents would like to help their children succeed in school; many, if not most, do not know how to help; and most will use materials provided to them if the materials are usable and not too time-consuming. Comments on the reaction forms also support a cautious belief that Family Connections did increase parent understanding of how children learn and of developmentally appropriate preschool programs.

The rate of returns by parents was impressive. Staff had speculated that parents of at-risk children, a group sometimes seen as unlikely to return written forms, might be motivated by having their opinions sought by schools/teachers. The announcement of the guides that project staff provided for teachers to send home told parents that their opinions would be asked. The reaction form itself included a message intended to boost parental self-esteem. Either or both messages might have affected return rates.

The way teachers handled the reaction forms might also have affected returns; the rates varied widely among teachers. Based upon the oral reports in workshops, teachers approached this task, as others in the field test, in many different ways. Some teachers apparently conveyed to parents the importance the teacher placed on the guides and related activities; other teachers were less successful in conveying such a message. Teachers uniformly expressed enthusiasm for the guides; their investment in its distribution varied considerably.

Teacher/Family Communications

Most teachers in the field test sites did more than just send the guides home each week. To prepare their communities for Family Connections, they encouraged administration to send out a press release to local media; a number of sites received newspaper and television/radio coverage. Teachers sent special announcements to families to let them know the guides were forthcoming. Project staff provided a suggested press release and announcement, but a number of teachers went well beyond those activities. Some did a virtual campaign to arouse family interest, with a written communication every day for a week before the first issue of the guides. Some made telephone calls and/or home visits.

All of these activities promoted increased communication between school and home. Ideas shared and generated in workshops were incorporated into the user handbook, which now is packaged and shipped with Family Connections. The guides are indeed freestanding, but their use is enhanced when teachers and family educators encourage and sustain parents.

Project staff recognized that factors other than Family Connections guides affected the number of teacher/family communications. The identity of these factors and the degree of influence are unknown. The fact that the end of the school year was nearing in the third month of the field test could have influenced the dramatic increase in the number of parent/teacher conferences. The large increase in the number of parents who "came to visit, observe or help in the classroom" could well be due in part to the fact that a large part of one workshop with teachers was devoted to planning and conducting parent meetings. The large number of home visits teachers made in the third month was doubtless influenced by the state mandate of two home visits a year by teachers in the KERA preschool programs. The workshop for teachers on how to make productive home calls in an

efficient manner could also have positively affected the number, although the training is perhaps more likely to have influenced the quality of home visits than the quantity.

Workshop Evaluations

The very high scores on workshop evaluations reflect more than just the satisfaction with the performance of those conducting the sessions. Participants not only had their needs met, they also had opportunities to share their experiences and expertise as preschool educators. As preschool teachers and aides who were engaged in field testing the family guides, they learned from each other as well as from project staff. Experiential learning enabled them to test the soundness of the theory on which developmentally appropriate education rests.

Beyond the hard data from the formal workshop evaluation instruments, the most gratifying evaluation was that participants lingered after the workshops were over to continue sharing ideas and experiences with each other and with staff.

SECTION VI: CONCLUSIONS

(1) The field test strategy of bringing together staff from multiple sites to engage in centralized planning at workshops structured to meet participants' professional development needs has a great deal to offer researchers.

(2) The decision (based on reactions to the two prototype issues) to focus on the weekly guides component of the Family Connections project accelerated the process of getting guides into use by a year or more.

(3) Parents of at-risk children will spend time with their children in developmentally appropriate ways when given materials such as Family Connections: interesting, colorful, easy to read, and simple to use.

(4) Family Connections weekly guides provide a potentially powerful tool in developing a strong parent involvement program.

(5) Communications between school and home increase and probably improve when schools use Family Connections.

(6) Involving key educational leaders in all stages of product development increases the likelihood of the product's being used. In the case of Family Connections, the Kentucky department of education purchased sufficient numbers of the guides to serve 20,000 families of at-risk children in the state. Programs in the other three states of AEL's Region have also purchased the guides in appreciable numbers.

SECTION VII: RECOMMENDATIONS

(1) AEL should conduct a follow-up study of a random sample of parents in the field test who expressed willingness to talk with someone from the Laboratory about the Family Connections guides.

(2) Project staff should actively promote the dissemination of Family Connections by identifying potential users and making them aware of the guides' availability with mailings of brochures and sample copies, presentations at regional and national conferences, exhibits, and advertising in early childhood publications.

(3) Project staff should seek to publish in both scholarly journals and in popular publications to make a wide public aware of the Family Connections guides.

(4) Project staff should explore collaboration projects with others, including regional education laboratories, to produce Spanish-language versions of Family Connections. Both the Far West Laboratory and the Southwest Education and Development Laboratory serve states that have very large Spanish-speaking populations.

(5) The Rural Excel program should develop a second volume of Family Connections for families of kindergarten and early primary-grade children.

SECTION VIII: REFERENCES

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APPENDIX

Citation Form*

The *Standards for Evaluations of Educational Programs, Projects, and Materials* guided the development of this (check one):

request for evaluation plan/design/proposal
evaluation plan/design/proposal
evaluation contract
✓ evaluation report
other

To interpret the information provided on this form, the reader needs to refer to the full text of the standards as they appear in Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, *Standards for Evaluations of Educational Programs, Projects, and Materials.* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980.

The *Standards* were consulted and used as indicated in the table below (check as appropriate):

Descriptor		The Standard was deemed applicable and to the extent feasible was taken into account	The Standard was deemed applicable but could not be taken into account	The Standard was not deemed applicable	Exception was taken to the Standard
A1	Audience Identification	XXXX			
A2	Evaluator Credibility	XXXX			
A3	Information Scope and Selection	XXXX			
A4	Valuational Interpretation	XXXX			
A5	Report Clarity	XXXX			
A6	Report Dissemination	XXXX			
A7	Report Timeliness	XXXX			
A8	Evaluation Impact	XXXX			
B1	Practical Procedures	XXXX			
B2	Political Viability			XXXX	
B3	Cost Effectiveness			XXXX	
C1	Formal Obligation	XXXX			
C2	Conflict of Interest	XXXX			
C3	Full and Frank Disclosure	XXXX			
C4	Public's Right to Know	XXXX			
C5	Rights of Human Subjects	XXXX			
C6	Human Interactions	XXXX			
C7	Balanced Reporting	XXXX			
C8	Fiscal Responsibility	XXXX			
D1	Object Identification	XXXX			
D2	Context Analysis	XXXX			
D3	Described Purposes and Procedures	XXXX			
D4	Definsible Information Sources	XXXX			
D5	Valid Measurement	XXXX			
D6	Reliable Measurement	XXXX			
D7	Systematic Data Control	XXXX			
D8	Analysis of Quantitative Information	XXXX			
D9	Analysis of Qualitative Information	XXXX			
D10	Justified Conclusions	XXXX			
D11	Objective Reporting	XXXX			

Name: Robert D. Childers (typed) Date: November 24, 1992

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